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Posthumanistic Fiction: A Critical Assessment with Special Reference to Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood Trilogy

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Introduction:

Today, every aspect of our lives has been reshaped by technology. Technology is ever changing. Man's curiosity about life has greater cause for this change. The progress is the result of unquenched thirst for power. The unending cycle of progress goes on until now and has made us what we are. It doesn't and can't consider future to make decisions about where we ought to go, how we ought to be? Due to technological and biological progress in every field, man is monitored. It gives rise to life full of complexities and unresolved knots, for example, to combat human aging, to keep us alive and healthy as long as possible etc. How would we manage the huge population growth? And who would own the technologies that made it possible? These are the huge questions before humanity. Every time human being tries his best to solve the problems as he has symbiotic relation with technology. We have realized long ago that man is at the center of all. Human being's distinctive capacities make him unique. And the merit status reserves for Humans due to rational, conscious, curious, autonomous, authoritative mind. To explore and examine Human the study of 'Humanism' is essential.

Humanism:

Before we define humanism, we need to understand what is meant by the term 'human'. The human is traditionally taken to be a subject marked by rational thinking/intelligence, who is able to plot his/her own course of action depending on his/her needs, desires, wishes. Humanism is the study of this individual subject and composite features. It treats the human subject as at the center of the world, which is influenced by the human's thoughts and actions. The freedom of the individual to pursue his/ her choice is treated as central to the human subject. So, the essence of human being lies in his rational mind which is entirely distinct from others. This rational mind is the only cause of change and improvement.

Our traditional view common to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant is that humans are responsive to reasons while animals respond to sensory stimuli and feelings. Being rational means humans bypass and surpass emotions, such as, fear and

anger. Responsiveness to reason is both cognitive and moral capacity. Consciousness means we have the capacity to experience the world and to understand and treat it most sympathetically. Changing human nature is the outcome which might be the most dangerous idea in all of human history.

Transhumanism:

It refers to techno-modification of the human, the idea of using technology to improve human conditions. Transhumanism is accurately defined by Cary Wolf as 'an intensification of humanism'. Transhumanists believe in the perfectibility of the human, seeing the limitation of human body (biology) as something that might be transcended through technology so that faster, more intelligent, less disease prone, long-living human bodies might one day exist on earth. Nick Bostrom, a leading transhumanist philosopher defines transhumanism as, 'Transhumanism holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods'. Transhumanists see existing forms of the humans as an intermediate stage before the arrival of the advanced human form in which bodies and their intelligence might be enhanced for greater utility and purpose. Transhumanism relies on human rationality as the key marker of 'personhood and individual identity'. That's why, Transhumanism has its root in rational humanism.

To add more, Transhumanism continues to believe in Enlightenment ideals of human. In Kant's famous essay *What is Enlightenment?,* he defines enlightenment as man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the capacity to use one's own understanding with the guidance of another. It's motto is –Have courage to use your own intelligence? It treats humanity as a species separate and self-contained. As Giorgio Agamben summarizes it best when he notes how human has been defined by the expelling of the animal, whereby 'something like an animal life has been separated'.

In its popular manifestation in sci-fi, there is overarching emphasis on the machination of human and humanization of machine. This near-obsessive exploration of superintelligent computers that threaten to overwhelm the human and the robotic implants that rearrange and derange the human in popular culture- treats the posthuman as an advanced human as a congeries of human and machine.

Generally speaking, Transhumanism thought does two things: 1) It considers current trends to see how future technologies will develop and how they might affect us. 2) It calls for the use of current and upcoming technology to bring about beneficial societal change. In nutshell, transhuman aims at: i) Superlogevity ii) Superintelligence iii) Superwellbeing. These three supers make humans transform into transhumans because of their extraordinary transformative potential.

Today we have the minds and equipments to begin developing technologies to combat aging. Unfortunately we lack will and financial support to do so. Most of us are so accustomed to the idea of growing old that aging seems like just a fact of life. If modern medicine is supposed to keep us alive and healthy for us as long as possible then the anti-aging movements takes medicine to its logical conclusion. With embedded technology and intelligence technology- you can send your thoughts at incredible speed to recipients on other side of planet or find your precise location using satellite and access the world's repository of recorded human knowledge with device you carry with you at all times. All of this was unthinkable twenty years ago. Out of this predicted computer capacity explosion, may eventually come artificial intelligence, a stimulated consciousness of fiction. This would propel human race into period of super intelligence. But perhaps as some argue, no non-biological computer could ever become conscious.

The Rise of Posthumanism:

If we look at the rise of Posthumanism we have to go back to humanism and especially man. In humanism man is at the centre which has "mental, discursive and spiritual values" that come to form the basis of political policies of the 18^{th} and 19^{th} century Europe. Man is essentially rational who is functioning as a kind of vessel of perfect rationality and reason. Armed with these tools, man is capable of limitless expansion towards his own perfection. This humanist ideology was adopted by Europe in 20^{th} century to view human as an unequalled force on the planet. It became the ideological backdrop of Europe's imperialist policy.

Decline of humanism began in 1960's and 70's starting with the rise of ideologies like fascism and communism. And these ideologies represent significant break from European humanism. It promoted ruthless departure from the Enlightenment which is known for human reason while communism advocated "communitarian notion of humanist solidarity". One of the reasons for the

communism's popularity in post-war Europe was the role it played in defeating the intellectually and culturally destructive forces of fascism as communism became emblematic of the defeat of fascism across Europe.

Posthumanism:

Posthumanism is a recent trend in literature which means "after humanism" or 'beyond humanism'. Simply it means technologically engendered nonhumans or posthumans may not be the kinds of beings to which humanist value apply. These Nonhumans/ Posthumans are immeasurably smarter, more robust than the humans but in alien ways that we can't understand. In 1993 article 'The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Posthuman Era' computer scientist, Vernor Vinge argued that the invention of technology for creating entities with greater than human intelligence would lead to the end of human dominion of the planet and begin posthuman era by intelligence vastly greater than ours. In other words, if humans or human-equivalent intelligences could use the technology to create super-human intelligences, the resultant entities could make even more intelligent entities and so on. Actually, the idea of posthumanism (post cyborgism) discusses the body of work that outlines the after effect of long term adaptation to cyborg technologies, i.e., what happens after 20 years of constantly wearing computer, meditating eyeglass technologies, and subsequently using the long term adaptation of virtual worlds followed by the bitter reality.

The idea of posthuman enjoys widespread currency in the era also known as the 'anthropocene' where human activities are having world-changing effects on the earth's ecosystem. To turn to posthuman is a response to growing public awareness of fast moving technological advances linked to the limitation of economic globalization and risks associated with the 'war on terror' and global security issues. At present, we are experiencing an explosion of scholarship on nonhuman, inhuman and posthuman issues. More importantly, the posthuman predicament enforces the necessity to think harder about the status of human subjectivity and ethical relations, norms and values.

In Philosophy, 'the posthuman turn' is triggered by the convergence of 'anti-humanism' on one hand and 'anti-anthropocentrism' on the other which may overlap. But different genealogies and traditions describe anti-humanism with its focus on the critique of the humanistic ideals of man. While 'anti-anthropocentrism' criticises species' hierarchy and advances of ecological justice, the posthuman expresses a

critical consensus about simple notion that there is no 'originary humanicity 'only 'originary technicity'. In other words, the term 'posthuman critical theory' marks the emergence of two main strands of thoughts – posthumanism and postanthropocentrism.

Posthumanism does explore the nature of the human in the age of advanced biotechnology, genetic engineering and computers. From much of the science fiction (Sci-fi) dystopian novels and other popular expressions, we understand that a new cultural history of the human needs to deal with the question: What forms of the human are now extant and existent? Sci-fi also calls upon us to speculate on the future course of human evolution: what will the human *be* like tomorrow? what comes after the (post-) human? Posthumanism is at first glance, a temporal marker indicative of later, perhaps more advanced human. It merely refers to an ontological condition in which many humans now and increasingly will live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and in close conjunction with machines and other organic forms.

So posthumanism in its critical avatar, is also a new conceptualization of human. It studies cultural representation, power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human above the other life forms and in control of them. This strand refers more hagiography of techno-modification of human. It argues that technological and biological modification will improve the human. A step further, we can say that posthuman stories told through science fiction are pure escapism. It's pretty awesome to imagine future, where we can see instantly beautiful, transform our bodies based on our whim, live to be zillion years old and vastly expand our mental faculty. In some ways, It's the purest distillation of science fiction's promise even than visiting stars and consciousness, cloned individual are the domain of Posthumanism and these varied themes are presented through sci-fi, for examples– Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Age of Time*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let me Go*, Schwatzing's *The Swam*, Michel Chorost's *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human*, Katherine Dunn's controversial novel *Geek Love* and Wendy Mass's Novel *A Mango Shaped Space* etc. These texts focus on the construction of the normal human with specific biological features as well as a particular physiology, anatomy, intellectual ability, sex, form and functions.

In all these science fictions, humanity of human is interrogated by drawing attention to the constructed nature of the human 'person'. More significantly, these texts emphasizes the blurring of bodily borders, identities (gender, species, race) and even consciousness in which isolating the 'human' from 'human-machine assemblage', or another form of life is impossible.

While the technological beings may result in being smarter, nicer, well and more capable, it might produce beings that are not human at all as it is beyond human-nonhuman. Such technologically engendered nonhuman or posthuman may not be the kind of beings but they may still be immeasurably smarter and more robust.

The major theme of Posthumanism defines that the future doesn't belong to humankind. Time and again we are shown that something else will replace man or at least share the world with our descendants. This may be robots, aliens or evolved, enhanced animals. To make posthuman is to make human superior in every way.

Critical Posthumanism

It is a philosophical approach towards posthumanism. According to Maureen McNeil critical posthumanism has two parts i) It rejects both human exceptionalism (the idea that human are unique creatures) and ii) human instrumentalism (that humans have a right to control the natural world). It involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as assemblage – co-evolving with machines and animals. In critical posthumanism organic body and the human and other life forms are more or less seamlessly articulated, mutually dependent and co-evolving. In critical posthumanism though human is a dynamic hybrid which focuses not on borders but on conduits and pathways, it is less interested in human subject. Finally, critical posthumanism sees the autonomy of the human as the system's self – regulation in response to the environment. If humanism concerns self-contained, exclusive and bounded human, critical posthumanism recontextulizes human in organic and locates the human structure, functions and form as the result of co-evolution with other life forms.

Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood Trilogy:

Octavia Estella Butler was one of the most prolific 20th century African-American writers. She is known for her works that crossed genre boundaries of science fiction and entered into the tradition of feminist and historical works. Her

heroines tend to be independent and intelligent African American women. Octavia was a bestselling and award-winning author, considered as one of the best sci-fi writers. She received both Hugo and Nebula awards which are considered noteworthy awards for Sci-fi. She is the first African-American woman to gain popularity and critical acclaim as a major Sci-fi writer.

Out of five pregnancies, Butler was the only child that has survived. Her father, who worked as a shoe shiner, died when she was very young. She began writing at the very early age and most of her memories are actually stories that she heard form her mother and grandmother. She lived with her mother in a very radically mixed neighborhood. She was very shy and described herself as a daydreamer. She overcame dyslexia and began writing from the age of ten to escape loneliness and boredom. At the age of 12, she developed interest in sci-fi.

Kindred is Octavia Butler's most famous science fiction work. In the late 1970's and early 1980's she worked on the "Patternist" series, in which a young woman works to defeat her tyrannical telepath father in the world spanning past and present. Butler has actually written an early draft for this when she was a very young woman. The Xenogensis Triology is Butler's Sci-fi series comprising the novels- *Dawn, Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*. This collection was first published under the title Xenogensis Triology which was renamed as Lilith's Brood Trilogy in 2000. The novels appeared individually – *Dawn* in 1987, *Adulthood Rites* in 1988 and *Imago* in 1989. From 1989-2000 they were boxed as Xenogenesis, a coinage from Greek 'Xenos' means stranger and genesis means beginning. It means an initial race of evolution of aliens. The prefix Xeno is used in Sci-fi terms like Xenobiology, study of alien life or Xenology, study of alien culture. In 2000, the umbrella title was changed to Lilith's Brood and trilogy remains available under that name.

In the Xenogenesis series, Octavia E. Butler tells a story of confrontation and accommodation between different cultures. One of these cultures is human beings; the other is far more advanced extraterrestrial called Oankali, the alien race. Transformation of humanity is accomplished by alien technology performed by genetic engineering called Oolai who participate in the mating of human and Oankali.

Lilith trilogy addresses the question of what it means to be human and how humans react in catastrophic situation. The human race has destroyed itself through war and an extraterrestrial species that have stepped in to help to keep a handful of humans alive and restore the earth back to its living state. Once humans are

sufficiently prepared for the new modified Earth, they would be sent "home" to reinstate the human population but at what cost? Humans are born with natural instinct to fight for survival and not to give up, but instinct becomes obscure when they are forced to live unnatural life amongst aliens, instead of having a "dignified" death with the rest of human race. The interference of the Oankali, the alien race, commits against the human can be juxtaposed with the invention of Siberia by the Russian empire in the 17th century. This is because the human would have not been able to survive without Oankali. Oankali are not our opposites but rather an extension of some humanity's most extreme tendencies. Oankali sex with human is depicted as one's super-organic and super-procreative power.

In the beginning of the first novel of this series, Lilith, the main protagonist, is awoken from the sleep after 250 years. She is the perfect example of strong woman to go through difficult times but still manage to survive. Lilith goes through a lot of difficulties but it doesn't break her. She makes her decisions and thinks out the consequences, but she does what she feels is the right thing to do in order to survive on the planet and hold the life again. The story is told with different types of life forms and their interconnectedness. Hence, Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood Triology can be analyzed and understood properly from the perspective of posthumanism as her works represent the posthuman condition of the present human life.

Scope of the Study:

The present study primarily focuses on Lilith's Brood Trilogy by Octavia Butler from the perspective of Posthumanism. The primary texts will be analysed in the light of the theory of Posthumanism. The theoretical opinions of the different critics will be considered to understand various facets of Posthumanism. Similarly, the area of contemporary posthuman novel will be surveyed to understand the representation of posthumanism in literature.

Objectives: The present research will be done under the following objectives:

- To explore the theory of posthumanism
- To pursue the representation of Posthumanism in contemporary fiction
- To analyse Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood Trilogy from the perspective of posthumanism

Hypothesis:

- Posthumansm is a recent trend in the field of humanities and social sciences. Many contemporary writers are using this trend in their works to show the posthuman aspects. Octavia Butler is one of the writers who have used the theme of posthumanism and it can be largely found in her Lilith's Brood Trilogy.

Research Methodology: Following methods will be used while doing this research work:

- Library method
- Interpretative method
- Analytical method
- Descriptive method
- Evaluative method

Significance of the Research:

The present human life is greatly influenced by science and technology. These influences are both positive and negative. They shape every aspect of human life. The positive influences help humans to develop without limitations which can be found in posthuman works. Similarly, the threats to the future humanity have been exposed through Posthumanism and posthuman literature, specially, science fiction. This research is an attempt to understand the the pros and cons of posthuman conditions through the lenses of Octavia Butler's Lilith's Brood Trilogy.

Tentative Chapter Scheme:

Chapter 1) The Age of Posthumanism

Chapter 2) The Life and Works of Octavia Butler

Chapter 3) Critical Assessment of Lilith's Brood Trilogy

Chapter 4) Conclusion

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